

July 22, 2019 | By Debra Kamin and Scott LaFee

With Landmark Gift, UC San Diego Will Map Compassion in the Brain, then Prove its Power

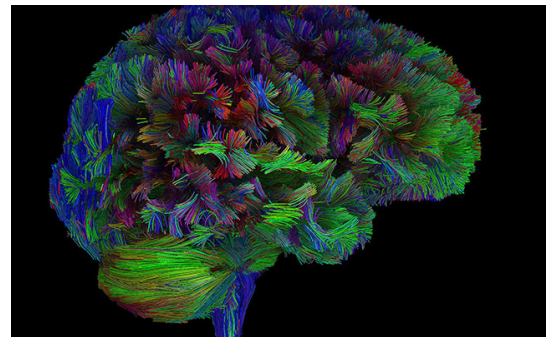
The T. Denny Sanford Institute for Empathy and Compassion at UC San Diego will explore the neurobiology of compassion, revamp medical education and address the epidemic of physician burnout

Seeking to transform the education and well-being of current and future doctors, South Dakota businessman and philanthropist T. Denny Sanford has created a new institute at the University of California San Diego.

The T. Denny Sanford Institute for Empathy and Compassion will conduct innovative research into the neurological basis of compassion, establishing the empirical evidence required to design a compassion-focused curriculum for training new generations of medical professionals and developing new methods to protect and promote the well-being of current clinicians and their patients.

“I have been inspired by the work and teachings of the Dalai Lama, whose interest in the intersection where science and faith meet is deep and profound,” said Sanford. “I have had the opportunity to see how grace, humanity and kindness can change people and the world. This gift extends that vision. Doctors work in a world where compassion is essential, but often lost in the harsh realities of modern medicine. If we can help medical professionals preserve and promote their compassion, based on the findings of hard science, the world can be a happier, healthier place.”

Sanford’s philanthropy is well-known. He has donated millions of dollars to build children’s hospitals and clinics in South Dakota, Minnesota and Florida. In recent years, he has focused attention on reimagining medicine and health care through vanguard research. In 2013, for example, he donated generously to launch the [Sanford Stem Cell Clinical Center](#) at UC San Diego. In 2008, Sanford helped build the [Sanford Consortium of Regenerative Medicine](#), a partnership of multiple local research institutions, including UC San Diego, to expand and translate stem cell research into clinical therapies and cures.



Using latest technologies, including neuroimaging, the institute seeks to establish the biology of empathy, then translate that data into compassion-focused medical training for new physicians and programs to improve the well-being of current clinicians and their patients.

“We are immensely grateful to Denny Sanford for his transformative generosity and his vision to address physician burnout,” said UC San Diego Chancellor Pradeep K. Khosla. “This sort of multidisciplinary, collaborative effort that builds upon our existing leadership in neuroscience to understand the expression of and capacity for compassion and empathy is exactly what UC San Diego is known to do.”

Sanford’s gift significantly advances the Campaign for UC San Diego, a \$2 billion fundraising effort to transform the student experience, the campus community and, through innovative interdisciplinary research, ultimately the world. Aligning with these priorities, the new Sanford Institute for Empathy and Compassion will also emphasize research, education and outreach, harnessing deep neurobiological resources and expertise in social sciences, engineering, data science and other disciplines across the university and in collaboration with partners, including the Sanford School of Medicine at the University of South Dakota and the T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics at Arizona State University, where Sanford has supported substantial programs in youth well-being, education and teacher training.

Neurobiology of Compassion

The new institute will employ state-of-the-art neuroscience technologies, including sophisticated neuroimaging, to identify and map brain activity created by empathic behavior, quantify the factors promoting or inhibiting compassionate behavior and then design new methods to increase empathic signals in the brain.

“UC San Diego is an undisputed hub for neurosciences,” said William Mobley, MD, PhD, associate dean of neuroscience initiatives, a long-time advocate for the empirical study of compassion and interim director of the new institute. “There are few places in the world with the experts and expertise, the resources and ability to tackle the topic.

“People talk about compassion, but almost no one has ever studied how it exists in the brain. We want to find the irrefutable scientific data that validates the immense power of compassion, identify and understand its biological underpinnings and then use that knowledge to teach empathy to new doctors, benefit current ones and, most importantly, improve health care for everyone, patients and providers alike.”

Medical Education

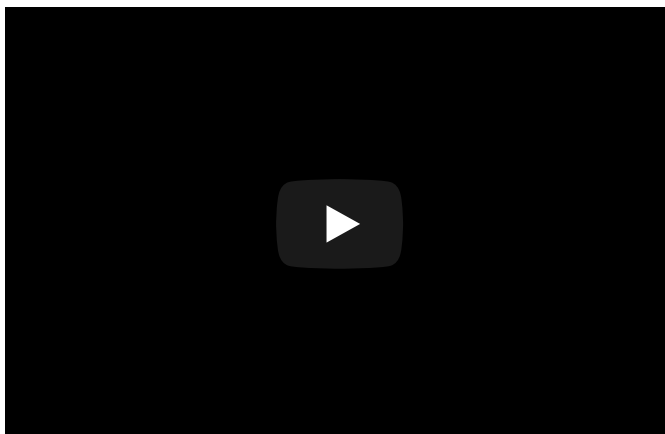
Data and discoveries based upon research conducted by institute scientists, other faculty and collaborators will be used to inform and redesign the current medical curriculum at UC San Diego School of Medicine, which will seek to effectively integrate compassion-centered methods into training modules and later, provide guidance and expertise to other participating schools and institutions to embrace empathy and compassion in their training.

Steven Garfin, MD, interim dean of the UC San Diego School of Medicine, said the Sanford gift comes at a time when medical students are under enormous pressure. “Today’s medical students are tackling an explosive growth of knowledge. Here at UC San Diego, we’ve made excellent strides in integrating compassion and strategies for bedside manner into our training; the new institute will develop and teach us new and more advanced tools to continue that work and exponentially expand that knowledge.”

The institute will partner closely with the [UC San Diego Student-Run Free Clinic](#), which has provided free comprehensive health care since 1997 to San Diego underserved communities.

“People go into medicine because they are driven by compassion. They're full of compassion. They have a desire to serve, a desire to help others, a desire to decrease suffering. Medicine as a profession is really all about compassion,” said Sunny Smith, MD, co-medical director of the Student-Run Free Clinic. “The problem right now is that the systems that are in place in medical training and in medical practice really cause suffering in the people who are practicing medicine and it makes us lose our compassion. That is the core concept of what we're trying to address.”

Physician Burnout



Part of the institute’s mission will also be to extrapolate new science-based programs and remedies to help address the issue of physician burnout (and other health professions, including medical students) through validated instruction of self-compassion, mindfulness training (including assessing and integrating existing compassion training protocols) and a heightened focus on mental health.

According to a 2019 Medscape national survey of 15,000 physicians, 44 percent reported burnout, with 15 percent saying they had experienced colloquial or clinical depression and 14 percent admitting they had contemplated suicide. Doctors have the highest suicide rate of any profession in the country: approximately 28 to 40 suicides per 100,000, according to the American Psychiatry Association.

David Brenner, MD, vice chancellor for health sciences at UC San Diego, said, “There is no understating the importance or need for this work and the significance of this gift. This is not about a single disease. It’s not about money for a building or project. It’s about transforming from a deep state of malaise and despair to a state of wellness that benefits everyone.”

Visit the T. Denny Sanford Institute for Empathy and Compassion website at compassion.ucsd.edu.

About The Campaign for UC San Diego

At the University of California San Diego, challenging convention is our most cherished tradition. The Campaign for UC San Diego is a \$2 billion comprehensive fundraising effort to empower the next generation of innovators to blaze a new path toward revolutionary ideas, unexpected answers, lifesaving discoveries and planet-changing impact. #GiveUCSD. #ContinueTheNonTradition. Learn more at campaign.ucsd.edu

For media: To access additional background information, images and video, visit health.ucsd.edu/compassion

MEDIA CONTACT

Scott LaFee, 858-249-0456, slafee@ucsd.edu

Judy Piercey, 858-534-6128, jpiercey@ucsd.edu

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